

Year A Third Sunday of Advent Are You the One Matthew 11 2 to 11

Are you the one? John the Baptist is now in prison. He was openly opposed to King Herod's marriage to his brother's wife and he's gotten himself into very hot water. Prison wasn't a place for doing your time and then being released like it is now. If you were in prison, you usually ended up dead. There was no food, no heat, no sunlight. You had to rely on friends and family to visit you to keep you alive. John was very fortunate to have disciples who visited him. But he had no false hope. He was in there because he'd angered the king. He wasn't likely to ever see the light of day again.

Under these dire circumstances, he had plenty of time to think and he was thinking of Jesus. He had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah but there was a problem. Jesus did not fit his – or anyone's – expectations of the Jewish Messiah. He'd shouted out to everyone who'd listen, Jesus was coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Where was all the fire? "Are you the one?" he wonders. God told him this man was the one but now he's not so sure.

John sends his disciples to ask Jesus this very important question. "Are you the one or are we to wait for another?" The "one" what? Who is Jesus expected to be and what is he expected to do? Isaiah lays it out for us (Is.35). The whole of creation is going to sing and rejoice, deserts will blossom, God's perfect peace will abound. There will be safety and joy for all. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will walk, the mute will speak. God's Messiah is expected to accomplish all this. God is here, Isaiah assures everyone. "He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." They believed the Messiah of

God was going to be a powerful king from the line of David who would defeat Israel's enemies and restore their fortunes. Life was going to be good once again.

Are you the one? John questions. Because, if you're not, we need to be strategizing and planning some other way of restoring Israel's former glory. Jesus doesn't answer "yes" or "no" to John's question. What he does is to proclaim the inbreaking of God's kingdom in the world through his actions. He deliberately echoes Isaiah... "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (v.5). Now, Jesus doesn't say "be patient, be strong" but that's exactly the effect his words will have for John and for John's disciples and for the eagerly listening crowd hanging out at his side. Be patient, be strong. This is what we hear in the other two readings for today (Isaiah and James' letter). God is here. God is doing what he said he would do. God will come and save you. Be patient. Be strong.

When Isaiah shared these words with the people, they were experiencing the effects of the attacks of the Assyrian army. When James shared these words, the Christians he was writing to were being persecuted for their belief in Jesus. When Jesus spoke his words for John and his disciples, John was in a dark and cold underground cell in fear for his life. When the Holy Spirit spoke these words to us today, we have our own prisons which bind us, our personal troubles, church troubles, community troubles, and global troubles. When we think of all these troubles, we can easily feel hopeless – it feels like God will never come through for us. God's kingdom will never come on earth as in heaven. We need those words of comfort today just as much as the Israelites did, just as much as the early church

did, just as much as John and John's disciples did. Be patient. Be strong. Here is your God.

Are you the one or are we to wait for another? Even in John's dire personal state, he still recognizes that salvation is not an individual pursuit. Are we to wait for another, he says. We are part of a group, a movement, a wave spreading around the world revealing the fulness of God's kingdom, bringing God's love, shining the light of Christ in the darkness of the world, in the darkness of our lives. Alone, we cannot do much in comparison to what we can do together. And we must stick together, work together, support each other. The liberation that Jesus brings to us is an ongoing process. John's question for Jesus today helps us focus in on the process Jesus intends to use.

Jesus did not come to gain earthly power. He came to serve, to bring life that has joy and purpose. He came to bring together, to make equal, to heal brokenness. In contrast to John's ministry – heavy on judgment, forceful and fiery, strong on the refining and purifying imagery – which does line up with the picture that the prophets often painted for us of the coming Messiah, in contrast to this Jesus's ministry focuses largely on healings, exorcisms, public banquets with tax collectors and sinners. His ministry is strong on restoration and light on the judgement and vindication that was expected. He wasn't even trying to get his cousin, John, out of jail. The Messiah that the Jewish people had pictured, would have thrown an army together and rescued John, overthrowing King Herod in the process. That would have been an awesome display of human power and wealth but Jesus shows us, time and again, that God's power is the power of love.

Using love and reconciliation, forgiveness, compassion, and mercy as the process for changing the world makes it a very long process indeed. This process requires that people choose to change their hearts and minds and their very way of being in the world. We have been chosen by God to work with him towards the fulfillment of this process. Notice that, through Isaiah, God has told us that we are to “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God!’” (Is.35.4) We are to say this in more than words. We say it with what we do and we say it with how we are. Joy is the infallible sign of God’s presence and joy is contagious.

Arland J. Hultgren, New Testament Professor at Luther Seminary, tells us we are “fortunate to be living on this side of Jesus’ resurrection and to be a part of his body, the church. We are not people adrift in the world with uncertainty about who we are, how we should live, or where we are going. We belong to his community of believers, dedicated to him, instructed by him, and carrying out his ministry. As his disciples, and with mutual support, we align ourselves with his ministry in our witness to the gospel and in our works of mercy and our care for the world” (workingpreacher.org). We radiate God’s love into the world all year long with our care for each other, with gifts and donations and meals for the people around us, with our time spent studying God’s word together, with phone calls and visits, with too many things to mention...

Are you the one? Why yes, yes we are. There is no other we are waiting for. Be patient. Be strong. Your God is here.